



Walk Like a Phoenician: Belly Dancing in Ancient Sources

- *A Class given by:
Lady Melanie de la Tour*
- Dedicated to the Canton of Brokenbridge, in the Crown Province of Ostgardr, Kingdom of the East
- *Habentes caritatem continuam omnia, hospitales invicem sine murmuration.*

Why study Roman dance to document belly dancers?

Historiographical problems for the study of medieval Middle Eastern dance:

- passed down by tradition
- lack of Arabic speakers in SCA
- Islamic prohibition of dancing

The Koran and Dancing



- In fact, the Koran does not prohibit dancing, although Muslim theologians have traditionally disapproved of dance.
- The early Islamic world inherited the late Antique tradition of slave girls who entertained with music and dance. These “qainas”, as they were called in Arabic, were condemned for their immoral behavior and sexually explicit performances.

Other Considerations

- Islamic prohibition of visual arts
- lack of written dance manuals



Roman Sources Provide

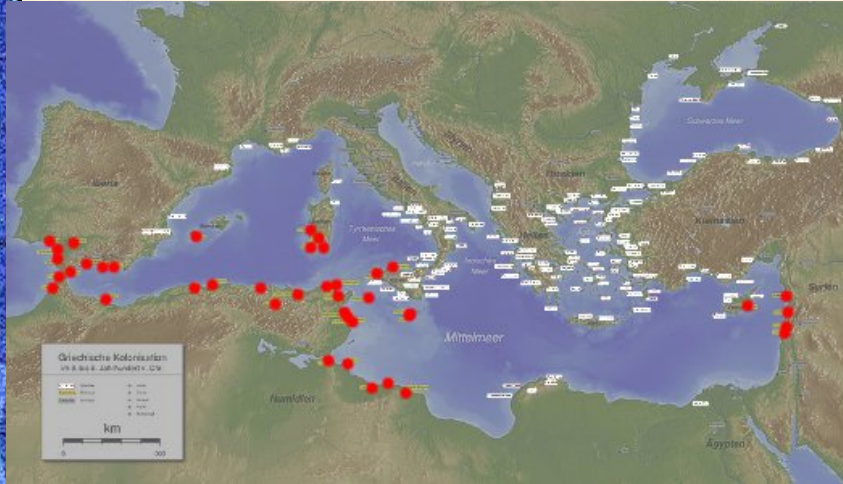
1. documents in a language (some) SCA members can read.
2. important background information concerning the development and early dissemination of the dance form.
3. Comes with corresponding artistic and archaeological evidence, which can be compared to literary descriptions.



Why are there Roman literary sources for ancient belly dancing?

- Ancient history 101 in 10 minutes or less
- Phoenicians and Carthage
- Hellenism, and the development of "Greco-Roman" culture.

The Phoenicians and Carthage



- By the late 8th c. BCE, the Phoenicians had founded trading posts and colonies around the entire Mediterranean, the greatest of which was Carthage.
- Explorers and traders from Carthage even ventured beyond the Straits of Gibraltar as far as Britain in search of tin.

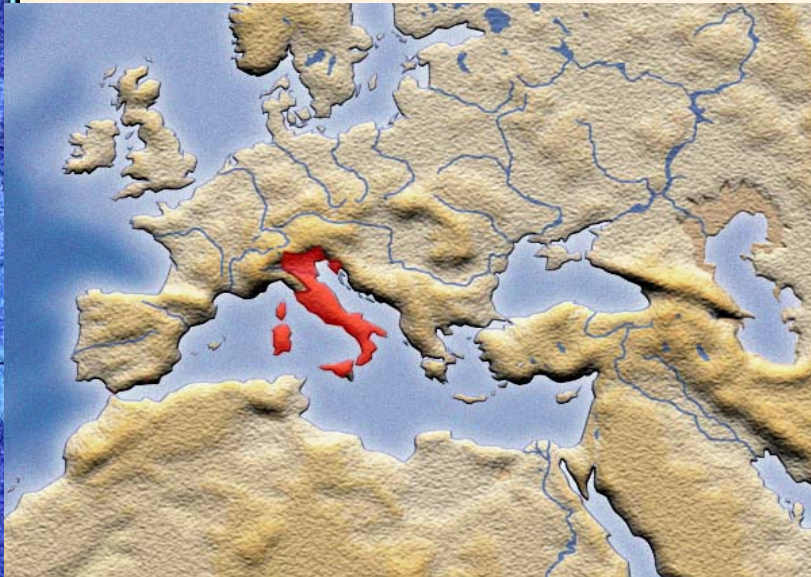
Etruscans and Phoenicians



- The **Pyrgi Tablets** were made around 500 BCE. Two of the tablets are inscribed in the Etruscan language, the third in Phoenician.
- They allow researchers to use knowledge of Phoenician to interpret Etruscan, and document Phoenician influence in the Western Mediterranean.

The First Punic War (264-241 BCE)

- The Roman Empire at 218 BCE, at the outbreak of the Second Punic War

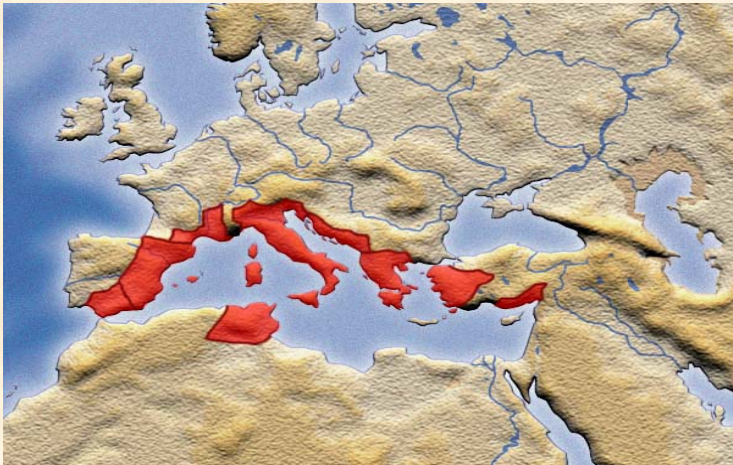


Changes effected by First Punic War:

- Conquest of Sicily, except for Syracusan territory - 241 BC E
- Annexation of Corsica - 238 BCE
- Annexation of Sardinia - 238 BCE

The Fall of Carthage

- The Roman Empire at 100 BCE: After the Fall of Carthage and Conquest of Greece
- Conquest of Macedonia - 148 BCE
- Conquest of Greece, incorporated into Macedonia - 146 BCE
- Creation of province of Africa - 146 BCE
- Inheritance of the kingdom of Pergamum - 133 BCE
- Province of Asia - 129 BCE
- Conquest of Cilicia - 102 BCE



Empire of Augustus



Rome and Ritual Dance

- The meaning of dancing at religious rites is that our ancestors felt that no part of the body should be debarred from religious experience.”
- Varro



The Dancers of Gades



- Romans ran into Mesopotamian-style fertility cults very early in their expansion across the Mediterranean, but their first encounters were in Spain—with the daughters of Phoenician colonists from Carthage.

Dancers of Gades

You may look perhaps for a troop of Spanish
maidens
to win applause by immodest dance and song,
sinking down with quivering buttocks to the floor.

Juvenal,
Satires, XI.162 -4



A Troup of Dancers

“One exception to the overtly ritual context of Roman dances appears to have been the *ludus talarius*. We know little about it save that it appears to have involved a troupe of dancers who were accompanied by singing, cymbals, or a castanet.”

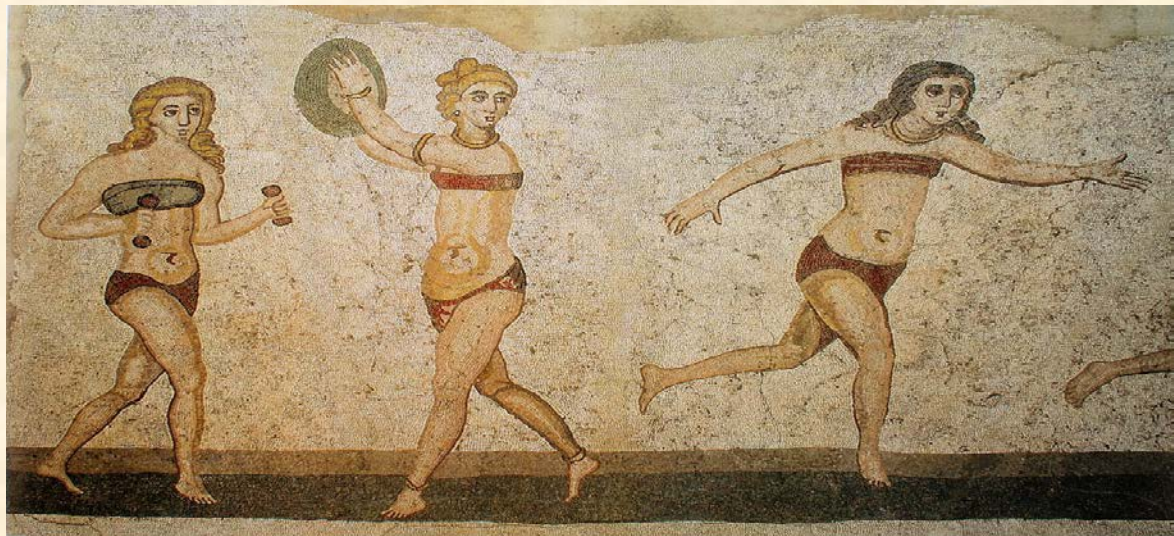
David Potter,
“Entertainers in the
Roman Empire,”
*Life, Death, & Entertainment
In the Roman Empire*.



The Ludus Talaris

Cicero, De Officiis, I.150

- lists dancers (saltatores) and those involved in low form of song-and-dance entertainment (totumque ludum talarium) among the lowest kinds of trades.



Teaching Romans to Dance



- “Beginning with the time between the [1st and 2nd] Punic Wars, free-born citizens, even sons of senators, went to dancing schools and learned to dance and waive castanets.”

Macrobius,
Saturnalia, III.14.4

Ludi = Public Games



Cybele, or the Magna Mater



- In Rome, Cybele was known as Magna Mater ("Great Mother").
- The Roman State adopted and developed a particular form of her cult after the Sibylline oracle recommended her conscription as a key religious component in Rome's second war against Carthage.

Cybele and the Galli



- Most modern scholarship agrees that Cybele's consort (Attis) and her eunuch Phrygian priests (Galli) would have arrived with the goddess, along with at least some of the wild, ecstatic features of her Greek and Phrygian cults.
- Roman citizens were forbidden to become priests of Cybele, so the Galli were always foreigners—who brought their exotic music and dance with them.

The Middle-Eastern Connection



- Gaditanae were not all from Spain. The term seems to have expanded to cover all Middle-Eastern style dancing. Literary sources freely mix references to Gades with those to Syria and Egypt. Crotalistria (castanet players) are also frequently connected to the Galli, or eunuch-priests of Cybele.

The Perfumed Dance Master

Martial, 3.63.3-6

- A pretty fellow is one who arranges neatly his curled locks, who continually smells of balsam, continually of cinnamon; who hums catches from the Nile and Gades who waves his depilated arms in time to varied measures.

Roman Musical Instruments



Infama, or the Social Status of Dancing

- Considered not in the best taste for proper Romans, probably because of its links to slaves and foreigners, and its strong sexual connotations.
- In the later Empire, senators and their children (and grandchildren) were forbidden to marry actresses and dancers. The law had to be repealed before Justinian could marry Theodora.

Dance in the Hippodrome



Dancers in Late Antiquity



- Dancers and dance instructors in noble Roman houses became so common that Ammianus Marcellinus complained that there were 3000 dancing girls in Rome.
- This was a scandal because they were not expelled as foreigners during a famine in 383.
- Ammianus and his Greek speaking friends were expelled.

Theodora: Courtesan and Empress



- As a young woman, Theodora earned her living by a combination of her theatrical and sexual skills.
- According to Procopius' account, Theodora made a name for herself with her salacious portrayal of Leda and the Swan.

But is it Belly Dancing?



Circus mosaic. Detail: Dancers & musicians.

c. 200-299, 3rd c Mosaic; Roman Provincial Floor; Rome. Vatican Museums. ©Kathleen Cohen; rom08088

Caption: ROMAN PROVINCIAL | Circus mosaic. Detail: Dancers & musicians. | c. 200-299 | Roman | Roman Provincial